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Nicaraguan rebels work to unite opposition

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MIAMI — Nicaraguan rebel officials are working to get rebel movements with differing ideological strains and other political opponents of the Sandinista government to unite under a single political umbrella by February, as part of an effort to persuade Congress to unblock U.S. funds for their struggle against the Sandinista government.

Adolfo Calero, leader of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest rebel movement and the only one maintaining a serious armed struggle against the Sandinistas, predicted in an interview here that most opposition to the Nicaraguan government would be funneled into "UNIR" — an umbrella organization created to accommodate all ideologies whose goal is loosely defined as "political pluralism and democracy" in Nicaragua.

"There will be a grand union in February — just in time to fit in with what's going on in Congress's considerations," Mr. Calero said.

The purpose of UNIR — the Nicaraguan Union of Reconciliation — is to increase the focus on the political aspects of anti-Sandinista insurgencies "to bring the political aspect to the forefront," Mr. Calero said.

"This would be a much more politically powerful organization to gain support in Congress. It would be a total change."

The armed struggle must continue to put pressure on the Sandinistas, said Mr. Calero and Alfonso Callejas, a member of the FDN directorate who is also based in Miami.

UNIR is still in its infancy. "It is incomplete," according to Mr. Callejas, but "will gain strength," according to Mr. Calero. So far, representatives of only two other rebel groups have joined it. But the declared aim provides an insight into the tactics the FDN and the Reagan administration will use to muster support in Congress.

Congress cut off all funds to the U.S.-backed rebel groups in the spring of 1984, after revelations that the CIA was involved in mining Nicaraguan ports.

The United States has provided \$80 million, mostly to the FDN, over the last three years, allowing it to grow from a group of 500 men carrying out sporadic raids from bases in Honduras to an estimated 12,000 men, mostly in Nicaragua.

After the cutoff of U.S. aid, only the FDN was able to continue its military operations. Other groups, based in Costa Rica, were unable to raise enough funds to supply their men.

Although the FDN says it can continue its struggle — at a reduced level — without U.S. funds, Congress's decision is considered crucial to the rebel military efforts.

The FDN has an image problem in the United States and in Nicaragua because its top military leadership is associated with the regime of the late Anastasio Somoza Debayle, the dictator toppled by the Sandinistas in 1979.

Eden Pastora Gomez, for example, a leader of a small group based in Costa Rica and a onetime Sandinista hero, resisted earlier efforts to join with the FDN, saying he would not do so until it removed Mr. Somoza's former national guards from its top military leadership.

At that time, Mr. Pastora fought alongside another ex-Sandinista, Alfonso Robelo, in the Costa Rican-based Revolutionary Democratic Alliance (ARDE). But last summer the two split because Mr. Robelo decided to join with the FDN.

Mr. Robelo joined UNIR in July, 1984. So far he, the FDN's Mr. Calero and a representative of the Misura Indian rebel group are the only guerrilla leaders to have joined UNIR.

Mr. Robelo recently announced that he would dedicate himself exclusively to political activity. He has maintained his political independence from the FDN, he says.

The military forces that reportedly stayed with Mr. Robelo and did not follow Mr. Pastora are headed by Fernando (El Negro) Chamorro. Since the cutoff of American funds, they have been unable to function.

A top FDN leader said that UNIR forces, supplied and advised by the FDN but led by Mr. Chamorro, would fill that vacuum, but Mr.

Callejas said that the focus now was not on the military struggle but on the political one. He added that he has tried to convince Mr. Pastora that his value to the insurgency was his political image.

Mr. Callejas said that in his view, Mr. Pastora's reluctance to merge with the FDN had less to do with political principles than a fear of being absorbed into the larger, more effective FDN.

But in the political context, Mr. Callejas pointed out, Mr. Pastora's popularity inside Nicaragua and his charisma would make him a "very valuable" addition to UNIR.

"Politics is a question of images, and we have a bad image. So politically they are much stronger than we are," Mr. Callejas said, referring to Mr. Pastora and others he hopes will join UNIR.

Mr. Pastora has not joined UNIR, but he has met with FDN leaders to discuss the possibility.

Mr. Callejas and Mr. Calero said that political realities inside Nicaragua would push other political opponents to the realization that the only course left them was to join UNIR. Mr. Calero said the time would come soon, now that the Nicaraguans had held their elections and were proceeding to crack down on political opposition and to heavily censor the press.

"I feel there is no more room for political struggle inside Nicaragua," Mr. Calero said. He said that opposition leader Arturo Cruz and the Democratic Coordination would have to "forget about playing politics inside."

Mr. Cruz was to have been presidential candidate of the Democratic Coordination, a political opposition coalition, in November's elections, but the coalition boycotted the elections, saying there was insufficient freedom to campaign.

Mr. Cruz was an advocate of a political settlement of the guerrilla war, but last week he endorsed aid to the rebels and said the United States should renew funding for them because political options were narrowing.

Mr. Calero expressed the conviction that Mr. Cruz and others like him would join UNIR. "It's going to gain strength and momentum. We are doing all for UNIR and so are other people."